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Oral Histories

SCU Voices of Homelessness Project

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S

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06/24/2013

S's Interview

St. Catherine University

S

06/24/13

L - When and where were you born?

S - I was born in Crookston Minnesota in _____1991 but I was raised in Fertile, Minnesota.

L - Ok, so up north.

S - Yep.

L - Can you describe your household growing up, who was in the family and all?

S - Yep, it was my mom and my dad and my older sister Anna and my younger brother Ben.

L - What was the living situation like?

S - We lived 15 minutes or so outside of Fertile, so kind of out in the country. We had a pretty nice house growing up. My mom and Dad were married and lived together with me and my brother and sister. We didn't have many neighbors or kids who lived near us so my siblings and I were very close.

L - Ok, so that sort of all American family ideal. Did you live in the same house through your whole childhood?

S - Yeah. I was born there and graduated high school there and then I moved after that.

L - So after high school, did you go straight to college?

S - Yes, I graduated in May and in August, I moved to the Cities and I started at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

L - Oh yeah, cool! Can you tell me about... how long were you at MCAD?

S - Just one semester, August to December.

L - What happened?

S - I was not in a good place. I had been struggling with, I think, mental illness probably since I was 16 or so and then it just hit its worst. And just being away from home for my first time and living with people I didn't know, I didn't know anybody in the Twin Cities at the time. I just found myself in a very dark place, emotionally.

L - Yeah, that is a lot of change and adjustment and [especially for] a young kid already trying to work things out. When did you first experience housing insecurity?

S - It was February of 2012.

L - So after that semester?

S - Not right away. I finished that semester then I moved back home for about a year or so. And the following August, I moved to Maplewood and I lived with a family I nannied for and I was there for about 6 or 7 months and that's when it happened. I just kind of decided, there were some really odd things going on with the family I was nannying for and it was just not a safe place for me to live anymore.

L - Oh dear.

S - Yeah.

L - I think in a position like a nanny, you're in a family's home and that [there's a] blurring of your work and home...

S - It was all grey. Even my bedroom was a common space for the family and it was just very odd.

L - What made it odd?

S - I think just them being able to come into my room whenever they needed to. I could have friends over, but it's like don't do that. We have kids here this is supposed to be a family space and not really a space for you to have social time.

L - So you were expected to go out to be social?

S - Yeah. It just wasn't a comfortable place for me to have people over.

L - You said it wasn't safe. What about it made it unsafe?

S - I felt like my privacy was really not a top priority for them so that was something that made me feel very uncomfortable. At one point the dad talked to me about how he had sold some of his own brother's prescription drugs, so that was definitely a red flag and I'm like ok, I need to get out of here. The parents also tried to set me up on dates with some of their 45 year old friends when I was only 19. The mom would walk into the bathroom when I was showering. Things like that made it feel unsafe.

L - So what did you do?

S - I stayed there for a little while longer just because I love the kids and I was pretty concerned about the kids having a family like that. I talked to my sister a lot throughout this too and she was really supportive of me trying to get out and find a new spot to live.

L - Was she up north?

S - She was in Duluth at the time.

L - So not in town, but not all the way home either. Did you work for an agency that placed you?

S - No, I found this family on a website called care.com or something like that and they seemed very normal in the beginning.

L - But, yeah, over time it just became more uncomfortable and decided it was time to go. How did you plan that? Or how did it happen?

S - I have some friends from a camp that I've worked at for a couple of summers and I reached out to one of them and I was like "Hey, I really need to find a new place to live because this space is not something I can deal with anymore." And one of my friends had a friend moving out of a house in Seward in Minneapolis. It took me about a month before I could move in there.

L - So for the month that you weren't in the house in Maplewood, where did you go initially?

S - It was a pretty big deal the night I moved out. I gave them my four weeks' notice because that's what we had agreed upon. And the dad just kind of lost it and said "you need to get out tonight, if you have something else planned," which I did but it was for a month out. So I contacted one of my friends in the Twin Cities and I was like "Hey, can you come get me?" So she and my ex-boyfriend came and helped me pack up all my stuff. And so I moved out and I

stayed with her for about a month or two and then I would stay at, I had an aunt and uncle in town too, I would stay at their house but I never really told them the circumstances.

L - I think especially that it...there are a lot of times that kids need a place to stay for a while. Why didn't you tell your aunt and uncle about what was going on?

S - I didn't want to worry them and I knew that they would be very concerned about my wellbeing and just my safety too.

L - I can see that it would be worrisome for them but they could also be helpful, I don't know. How did you balance...how did you cope in that month? You're at your friend's place some of the time and your aunt and uncle's and just carrying your stuff?

S - I stored all my stuff in my car for about a month. I did store some of it in my friend's house but she didn't have a lot of extra room. My sister was a huge help throughout all of it. I was talking to her and she knew the whole situation and she was always saying things like "You'll get through it and it's just a temporary thing."

L - In terms of having a job that...it was both your home and your employment, were you able to find other work in that month?

S - Not in that month. I didn't find a new job until the middle of March.

L - So you needed to get secure [employment]... or it worked out that way that after housing was more...

S - Yeah after I found a spot, I was more able to look for jobs and find a job finally.

L - That makes sense. How well did your solutions work for you as you found yourself with housing insecurity and you found some friends and family to be there, do you feel that was a good solution?

S - To move out?

L - No. You moved out and you didn't have secure housing for a couple of months, did you have a support system? Who could you count on to be there for you when you needed help?

S - There wasn't a whole lot in the Twin Cities itself. I had my friend I was staying with but she also had her life and she wasn't willing to put everything aside, which is fair.

L - Right.

S - So there were a lot of times that I would call my sister or just call my little brother and just talk to them and even if it wasn't about how horrible things were at the time but just to talk to them and hear their voices.

L - Kept you grounded. I've got to say you don't talk about your parents, did they know what was going on? Were they supportive?

S - I told them what was happening but I did spare some details because I knew they would be very, very concerned which is, again, very fair.

L - What kind of details?

S - Just things like where I was staying or where my things were. I told them I was staying at a friend's house but I don't know if they knew how difficult it was during the daytime, when no one was home. Things like that when I had to be outside of the house.

L - What did you do when you needed to be out?

S - This all happened during the school year, so I was still enrolled in classes, so I would go to libraries or coffee shops and just do my homework or things like that.

L - And still stay in school. Wow. Were you at MCAD at this point or at St. Kate's?

S - Neither, I was at St. Paul College at that time.

L - So, kind of starting over fresh? Did you think of going home to your parents? Can you tell me about why that didn't seem...

S - Yeah, that was definitely a thought I had. One reason I didn't want to go back was because I was in school and I really wanted to finish out the semester. I think it was also pride thing, like this is a second try of being on my own and I didn't want to have to have my parents come bail me out again. I identify myself as a pretty independent person so going home would have infringed on that. I was still struggling with mental illness. I had just been diagnosed with an eating disorder in October which I hadn't told my parents about yet and I knew it would be difficult to live with them if they didn't know that and I was not at a point where I felt comfortable telling them. Ending treatment for my eating disorder with my team in Minneapolis was not something I was willing to do either.

L - Right, feeling that you needed to take care of it on your own. Can you tell me about what your biggest priorities were at that time in terms of just the things that you felt like I need to take care of this first?

S - Definitely school was a top priority and trying to find income or just keeping my income was a big deal.

L - Not spending money. Were you able to earn some money in that time?

S - No. I had been saving a lot of my earnings just because I didn't have to pay for rent or food so I had some back up which was really good.

L - And a car.

S - Yes, and a car.

L - So a lot of the resources that you accessed were either ones you had or ones of your personal network in terms of. Did you look into any other sort of resources or support to help with the situation?

S - I had been getting help with mental health since October of that year, so I definitely had people I could talk to and they were really great about giving me places to look for apartments or kind of cooperative living or something like that.

L - So really trying to kind of reach out and see what you had that you could tap into terms of and that rather than it just being any sort of one this is my answer I'll go stay at my friend's place, that's part of it and this is part of it and that's part of it?

S - Yeah. So I looked into my options but just because of how that night happened, I had to make a really quick decision and that was just the easiest one.

L - It sounds pretty traumatic?

S - Yeah it was. I thought I was going to be leaving on really good terms. Four weeks is a long time to give an employer. I didn't feel like I had done anything wrong so I didn't feel I should

have been treated that way. _____The dad just kind of let everything loose and started yelling and was like you need to leave the house tonight and it was like 6 o'clock at night, when I gave my four weeks and I didn't know what to do. It's hard to remember a lot of what happened just because it was all... it happened so fast.

L - But fortunately you could reach your friend and she could come. Wow. That's a lot.

S - It was. And the kids were there and they didn't know what was going on and they're crying and saying why is she leaving, why is she leaving, and it was just like...

L - And why is dad yelling. Had you seen outbursts before?

S - He had fought with his wife a little bit and used verbal abuse but I tried to be out of the house whenever that happened because it's not my place for that. I could tell he was a really, I don't even know the word to use, I don't think he was happy with his life.

L - An angry-tempered person.

S - Yeah.

L - So your period of housing insecurity was about a month?

S - Yeah.

L - After that time did you have any other periods of housing insecurity?

S - Nothing major. This past two weeks actually, my roommate had been trying to kick me out of my own apartment. And that was really scary but I talked to my sister again and she reminded me that I signed my name on the lease so I was in a really secure place this time which is really, really reassuring because I didn't have that the last time.

L – Right, they held all the cards. One of the things I would like you to speculate on; do you think gender influenced your experience? Do you feel like being a woman is relevant or relates to?

S - Maybe not in every case, but I think in my case yes. They knew I was submissive which is sometimes a common trait in women so they knew that they could kind of walk all over me. And I think even with this most recent little scare, I think that's what my roommate was doing because he is male. I think he just knew that I would be the one to cave before...he would. I also think I have this thing that many women have—I will put others before me many more times than I will put myself first. Because of this I get manipulated.

L - Why does your roommate want you to move out?

S - He has been in a really dark place since probably January and I think he is very unhappy and I am still friends with a lot of our common friends and I think that is really difficult for him to deal with. I think he's gone off the deep end, honestly.

L - Is he still living with you?

S - Yes, he got a sublet though so he will be moving out the 1st of July.

L - And you've met the sublet and you're ok?

S - I haven't met her yet. But I honestly don't know if it could be any worse than it is right now. I know it sounds bad but things just aren't ideal at all.

L - And again there is a kind of insecurity when being at home doesn't feel like a place that you can be safe and at home and at peace.

S - Yeah it's almost like I haven't really been living there. I've been staying nights at my friend's house because it's such an uncomfortable space to be in. He doesn't acknowledge me or anything [when] we are in the same room, it's just really, really odd. It feels kind of similar to what it was like before.

L - It seems like there is something kind of controlling and angry is that...?

S - That is really accurate, yeah.

L - Do you feel safe?

S - I don't think he would physically hurt me but I do definitely worry about things he might do to himself or to someone in our friend group. He's not violent but he is definitely emotionally abusive and verbally abusive. Both of which he has done to me.

L - There is destruction.

S - Yeah.

L - In terms of your experiences, is there something I should know that I'm not getting at?

S - I'm not sure if I bring it out in people, like if it's my personality or something, but I think there is definitely a theme of people thinking that they have more control over a situation than I do or they try and manipulate me in a way that I don't get what I need or want.

L - Do you feel like you're learning about sort of finding that voice?

S - Oh for sure.

L - This experience and the counseling?

S - I think definitely through the therapy sessions I've been going through I've learned to speak up for myself and say this is actually what I need because I never knew I needed things before. I also have a good friend who helps me speak up for myself and express my needs.

L - Yeah. So you're anticipating your current situation will be getting more secure? Oh, one other thing I forgot.. Did you have adequate food when you've had housing insecurity?

S - Yeah, that was never really an issue for me. I was able to get food.

L - It sounds like you've always had some money, some resources that you weren't totally flat out desperate in that way.

S - Yeah, the first time I had money to bounce back on but this time I think was a lot more scary just because I don't have.....

L - The safety net?

S - Yeah. It has [been] pay check to pay check lately.

L - Was it a condition that he find the new sublet, just so you knew that part of the rent would be covered?

S - He had threatened to try and kick me out a couple of different times and I just finally said you know I'm not leaving, I have too many commitments right now that I can't just pick up and move again, so you're going to have to find a sublet if you want this to happen, so he did.

L - So it worked?

S - Yeah it did.

L - I want to shift to your educational journey. So kindergarten through high school in Fertile, Minnesota and then MCAD, and then St. Paul College, and at some point you go from St. Paul College to St. Kate's; so can you tell me about that?

S - I was at St. Paul College for a year and I was studying sign language there and then I transferred to St. Catherine's.

L - Why did you make that move?

S - I know that St. Kate's has one of the top ten programs for sign language in the US.

L - Wow.

S - Yeah, so it's right here and it's a great resource so I definitely wanted to get in.

L - St. Paul College sort of got you into the field but you wanted to take it up to the [next level]... So in terms of your degree plan, how far are you? Well you told me so...

S - I just finished my sophomore year so I'll be a junior next fall.

L - So you're making headway. How do you like St. Kate's?

S - I love it. It's the best school I've been to. There is a huge community that is so welcoming and just makes you feel very much at home. And it's really nice that it's an all-girl school because there are so many topics that go missed when you are in an institution that is co-ed.

L - Like within the classroom environment and outside would you say?

S - Yeah, I think the in classroom definitely sparks things that come out in your groups of friends outside.

L - I think, in terms of class discussions kind of connects to your story, is there is research that shows particularly soft spoken women are less likely to speak in class if it is a co-ed class. Do you feel like it's easier for you to [use your] voice?

S - It seems like there is a lot less judgment whenever I talk or other people talk which is really great. It is getting easier all the time. Maybe being here has also helped me to feel more at ease about expressing my wants and needs.

L - Important for learning.

S - Yeah, yeah.

L - Do you think your classmates are sensitive or aware of issues of poverty, housing insecurity homelessness?

S - I don't think so. I didn't really even know that my situation could be classified as a homelessness situation until I got here and learned more about it.

L - Right. What did it take for someone to be homeless in your mind before that?

S - A much longer period of time without a house or just anywhere to live and keep your things.

L - For this project we are using the congressional definition and that it is pretty inclusive. So if there is a time where you do not have a place to call your own, that's housing insecurity. Or the place you have is threatened or insecure and I think that change in definition is certainly essential to what we're doing.

How old are you S?

S - I'm 21.

L - When you think of the curriculum, your professors, the professional staff that you've encountered at St. Kate's, do you think they show sensitivity to issues of homelessness, poverty?

S - I'm sure they would, it's never really come up in class. In our history class it came up a little bit but otherwise I haven't really talked about it.

L - So it's something that isn't really necessarily talked about.

S - I think it would be a good thing to talk about though because if it happened to me, I can't imagine how many people it's happening to.

L - I think that is powerful in itself. Can you tell me about when you sort of had that realization that you too had experienced a kind of homelessness?

S - I went to your production...

L - The public event? [about the oral history project]

S - Yes, the public event and I just heard a lot of different stories and monologues of some things and I was like, "Wow this has happened to me. I've been there." I think that's when I finally realized, oh yeah I didn't have anywhere.

L - And this would qualify. What did you think as you realized that?

S - It was surprising because for the most part I felt like I always had a very good life, not that being homeless is bad.

L - But it's something that you didn't feel like you were at risk of.

S - Yeah exactly. It's just not something that anybody ever plans on.

L - And the fact is there are situations that can turn relatively quickly and I think particularly when you are young that you don't have as much control over...

S - No not at all. I think it's a lot more likely to happen when you are younger.

L - What do you wish other people at St. Kate's or other people generally kind of knew about the issue of homelessness or your experience, what do you think that is the message you would want them...?

S - Um, I think just being very sensitive to it and being mindful that it's really common. So many people have, even if they do have a place to live it's not always safe or secure and it's just not a place they want to be, so I think just being mindful of that and trying to be inclusive with people.

L - Do you think people have been mindful with you or do you think many people really know?

S - I don't think many people know about it. I think there is still a really big stigma about what it is to be homeless and I'm not very open about talking about it but maybe if I do share my story more, then it will be...it's kind of like if one person does it, then other people might feel more comfortable too.

L - Yeah and I think that the stuff that you could recognize it in your own experience even though it was not what you thought of as homelessness but as you learned a little more, realized this is closer than I thought.

S - Yeah definitely.

L - You plan to graduate in two years, what are your plans and hopes and dreams for post-graduation?

S - Honestly I just want to get a job in my field.

L - That sounds like a pretty good one.

S - I'd be so content to just stay in the Cities and work and maybe in a few years and kind of travel around and go to places I've never been before. And I think because I have had that insecurity just finally feeling like I have something stable in my life and kind of being able to do it on my own and provide and have resources for myself, I think I'll be really content.

L - I assume that one of the things about this [ASL] program it does prepare you for a specific job, it's a professional program and there should be some degree of salary and stuff that you feel you could count on?

S - Yeah.

L - If you were doing the interview, is there a question that you would want to know that I'm not asking or is there something.. ?

S - I think just in my case mental health has played a huge part in kind of where I ended up, so I think that might be a good question for someone to address.

L - Right. And it is something that we know that people experiencing housing insecurity that there can be mental illness but also other issues that it is interconnected.

So in your case how do you think it played a role?

S - Even after I had moved home for a while, after MCAD, I did go into a partial treatment program which is just a day program and I did that for three weeks. ____ Even after that I don't think I was in a great place so I think there is still lingering depression and sadness and lots and lots of anxiety, so I think I was maybe more focused on that than maybe trying to communicate or talk to the people I was living with.

L - Ok. Do you feel like some of that wisdom is important for going forward? That learning a little more about yourself and what you need...

S - Yeah. Like I said before, I had no idea that I had needs and I always assumed they were wants and they weren't necessary, like there are things that I need to do and have just to survive.

L - What are some of those needs?

S - The basic things like shelter and I think this could probably be disputable but I think just being in a place where I feel comfortable and I feel safe is so big.

L - No one can dispute your own needs, there's no disputing it if it's something you need. What do you need to feel safe?

S - I think being supported is a huge thing.

L - Who supports you right now?

S - My family is a huge one. I've come to find some really good friends here and I think that has helped a lot. Having people who are a lot closer to you and can be there.

L - How do you support yourself?

S - I think finally standing up for myself.

L - That's pretty awesome – seriously. What do you say is your best strength?

S - I think I'm a really a patient person.

L - Without thinking what's another one? I know this about myself.

S - I'm not in a place to... I haven't decided that and I'm not sure if I recognize that yet.

L - I can say you've got a lot and I just met you. You're resilient – that's huge you bounce back from things, you've continued with school and you had a choice to come tell us all about you, you're open, you're honest, you're very strong, super intelligent.

S - Thank you.

L - Is there anything else you want to share?

S - I don't think so.

L - Thank you very much S.

2 hours